Southeast Asia and the Cold War

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Introduction

Southeast Asia was a significantly important area of conflict in the extension of the Cold War outside Europe in the early post-Second World War period. These proxy confrontations had a considerable impact in shaping the process of decolonization and, invariably, state-formation in the region. Most research on the Cold War in Southeast Asia in recent years has, however, tended to focus on the conflict in Indochina, especially Vietnam and, to a lesser extent, Cambodia and Laos. The southernmost states in Southeast Asia have not received adequate attention in this context. The Federation of Malaya and, later, the Federation of Malaysia, for example, have not been given sufficient attention in the context of the Cold War and the extent to which these related developments have shaped the modern contours of the emerging nation-state. This essay examines the impact and influence of the Cold War on two formative stages in the modern history of Malaysia. The first part of the essay examines the impact of the Cold War in the context of the decolonization in Malaya in the 1950s. The second, examines the impact of the Cold War on the formation of the broader federation incorporating Singapore, North Borneo (Sabah), Sarawak and Brunei: a project that was called ‘Greater Malaysia’ in the early 1960s. This essay argues that developments related to the Cold War in Southeast Asia considerably shaped the politics of Malaya’s independence in the 1950s and the creation of the larger Federation of Malaysia in 1963.

The Cold War and the movement for independence in Malaya

Most scholars have focused on the activities of the nationalist movements in our examination of the process of decolonization in Malaya. There are, of course, strong grounds to support such an approach as there is considerable historical evidence which indicates that the nationalist campaign, particularly the aggressive political campaign launched by the Alliance Party from 1953, was decisive in the speeding up of Malaya’s independence. Colonial Office documents declassified